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primers used in this context are synthetic oligonucleotides which contain from 15 to 30 bases and which possess sequences which are complementary to the beginning and the end of the sought-after DNA segment.

5 The sought-after DNA segment is therefore flanked by the two primers. In the third reaction step, the temperature is brought to the optimum for the heat-stable DNA polymerase. Starting from the primers, the polymerase synthesizes one copy per starting DNA, with
10 the length of the DNA to be duplicated being determined by the distance between the primers. By repeating these process steps many times, the target DNA is amplified and made available for analysis.

15 Primer sequences which hybridize with in each case one of the DNA strands, at the two ends of the DNA segment to be amplified, are a prerequisite for performing a PCR in a target-orientated manner. For this reason, it is necessary to have precise knowledge of the
20 nucleotide sequences at the beginning and end of the DNA segment to be duplicated. In order to prepare suitable primers, therefore, it has until now been regarded as being necessary to prepare a primer which is suitable for selective hybridization and whose
25 adequate hybridization with the material under investigation is ensured by the primer having a species-specific, i.e. autologous nucleotide sequence.

In this connection, selective hybridization means that
30 such a primer, which hybridizes selectively, hybridizes only, and exclusively, with the DNA segment to be detected, i.e. the target nucleic acid.

However, it has now turned out that the conventional
35 PCR method is limited in its application range by being tied down to species-specific, autologous primers and to the autologous oligonucleotide probes which are likewise employed in this method, and is, on occasion,

not suitable for identifying unknown variants of the DNA sequence to be detected.

The object therefore arose of improving the application
5 range of nucleic acid amplification methods, in
particular the PCR method, by making available, for
detecting a target nucleic acid, a selection of primers
which hybridize nonselectively with this target nucleic
acid. This object is achieved by means of a process for
10 obtaining heterologous primers, which hybridize
nonselectively with the target nucleic acid, from
organisms which are foreign with regard to the target
nucleic acid, with these primers nevertheless being
suitable for amplifying a target nucleic acid.

15 The invention therefore relates to a process for
finding heterologous oligonucleotide sequences for a
nucleic acid amplification method, in which

20 a) mutually overlapping sequence fragments, which
preferably comprise from 30 to 50 bases (e.g. from
1 to 50, from 25 to 75, from 50 to 100, etc.), are
generated by fragmenting conserved regions of the
nucleic acid to be amplified,

25 b) these sequence fragments are used for finding
similar DNA segments in Genbank or other DNA
databases, e.g. EMBL, and heterologous, i.e.
hybridizing oligonucleotide sequences which are
30 derived from organisms of other species are
thereby identified, and

c) the heterologous, hybridizing oligonucleotide
sequences which have been found are employed as
35 primers and/or probes for isolating the target
nucleic acid using a nucleic acid amplification
method.

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the heterologous sequences for replacing the autologous primers and probes.

If the heterologous primers which have been obtained in this way still contain mismatches, the bases which are located at these points can then be replaced with a "universal base", such as inosine, thereby making it possible to achieve complete hybridization of the nucleotide sequence of the heterologous primer with the target nucleic acid.

It is consequently possible to use this process to obtain heterologous primers from organisms of other species, with these primers being suitable for hybridization with the target nucleic acid in the same way as autologous primers, i.e. primers which are derived from the DNA sequences present in the organism which contains the target nucleic acid. The heterologous oligonucleotides which have been obtained in this way can also be used for preparing a probe which can be employed for a PCR. Such probes are frequently fluorescence-labeled and are based, for example, on a 5'-nuclease assay (Livak et al., 1995. Oligonucleotides with fluorescent dyes at opposite ends provide a quenched probe system useful for detecting a PCR product and nucleic acid hybridization. PCR Meth. Applic. 4:357-362) or on a particular secondary structure (Tyagi et al., Molecular beacons: Probes that Fluoresce upon Hybridization. Nature Biotechnology. March 1996, Vol. 14, pages 303-308).

However, it is also possible, for the process according to the invention, to employ a primer which is labeled with two fluorescent dyes (reporter and quencher), with this primer not hybridizing completely with the DNA sequence to be amplified at the 3' end. This method is described in German patent application 197 55 642.6. In the amplification, for which it is possible to employ one or more thermostable DNA polymerases, at least one

of which must have proof-reading properties, the unpaired bases of the labeled primer are then liberated together with the quencher dye attached thereto, resulting in an increase in the fluorescence at the
5 wavelength of the reporter dye.

The heterologous oligonucleotides which are obtained by the process according to the invention, and which can be employed for a PCR, are consequently distinguished
10 by the fact that, when used as primers or probes, they hybridize not only with the DNA sequence of the target nucleic acid but also with nucleic acids present in organisms of other species. Despite this, they are suitable for detecting or isolating the target nucleic
15 acid in exactly the same way as autologous oligonucleotides, that is oligonucleotides which are derived from the same organism.

Employing the above-described approach, the conserved
20 5'-untranslated region of hepatitis C virus (HCV) was used for finding heterologous sequences. The following sequences represent a selection of the search results and were used for detecting HCV by means of PCR.

25 The SEQ IDs firstly show the derived primer sequences (SEQ IDs 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8) or probe sequences (5, 9) and, below that, the homology of the respective HCV region with the heterologous sequence. In the sequences which were used, the nonhomologous bases were replaced
30 with inosine (I).

5' GGT ICA IGG TCT AIG AGA CII CCC GGG 3'

345 ..TCATGGTGCACGGTCTACGAGACCTCCCGGG... 315

[illegible]

where "5' GGT ICA IGG TCT AIG AGA CII CCC GGG 3'" depicts the sequence of a primer. AB007366 is the accession number in GenBank under which the sequence of the Red Sea Bream iridovirus DNA polymerase gene is deposited. The sequence comparison shows the homology which exists between HCV (top) and the DNA polymerase gene (bottom), with a | denoting an identical base.

5' ACT CCA CCA TAG ATC ACT 3'

31 GGAGTGATCTATGGTGGAGT 12

95982 GCAGTGATCTATGGTGGAGT 96001

SEQ ID No. 3:

5' CTA ICC ATG GCI TTA GTA TGA G 3'

AC004616 Homo sapiens Xp22

```
      88 CTCATACTAACGCCATGGCTAG 67
          ||||| ||||| |||
      80839 CTCATACTAAAGCCATGGATAG 80860
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SEQ ID No. 4:

5' AGC ACC CTI TCA GGC AGT ACC 3'

Z97055 Human DNA sequence from PAC 388M5 on chromosome 22

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      285 .GGTACTGCCTGATAGGGTGCTTGCGAGTGCC ... 315
          ||||| ||||| | |
      50941 TGGTACTGCCTGAGAGGGTGCTGCTGCCTTTGGGA 50975
```

SEQ ID No. 5:

5' FAM-TGG GTC ICG AAA GIC CTT GT-TAMRA 3'

AJ009757 Helianthus tuberosus sst-1 gene

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      274 CCACAAGGCCTTTCGCGACCCAAC 251
          | |||| | |||| | |||| |
      711 CTACAAGGACTTTCGGGACCCATC 734
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5' GCT CAT GIT GCA CGI ICT ICG AGA C 3'

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335  GCTCATGATGCACGGTCTACGAGAC 311
      ||||| |||||  || |||||
4557 GCTCATGGTGCACGAGCTCCGAGAC 4581

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5' CAT AGI TCA CTC CCC TGT GA 3'

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60  .CAGTAGTTCCTCACAGGGGAGTGATCTATGG... 30
    |  ||  ||||| ||||| |||||
228 CAATGCGTGGATCACAGGGGAGTGA ACTATGACTA 262

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5' AAA GIG ICT AGC CAT GIC ITT AGT A 3'

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60 ...AAAGCGTCTAGCCATGGCGTTAGTATGATG 89
      ||| | | ||||| | | ||||| ||
92 CGAAAGAGGCTAGCCATGCCCTTAGTAGGACT 124

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SEQ ID No. 9:

5' FAM-GTA CCT GGG TCI CGA AAG ICC TTG TGG TAC T-TAMRA 3'

AJ009757 Helianthus tuberosus sst-1 gene

274 CCACAAGGCCTTTCGCGACCCAAC 251

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |

711 CTACAAGGACTTTCGGGACCCATC 734

5 If the abovementioned primers and probes are used for a
PCR, a nucleic acid amplification can then only take
place in the presence of the hepatitis C virus nucleic
acid since a prerequisite for the PCR is that at least
one primer pair hybridizes with the nucleic acid to be
amplified. However, in the present case, that is only
possible in the presence of hepatitis C virus since the
requisite primer pair for any other nucleic acid is not
10 available. A nested PCR increases the specificity still
further.

15 The following reaction mixtures were used to
demonstrate the specificity and sensitivity of the
above-described primers and probes with regard to
detecting HCV.

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Example 1: HCV nested PCR, TagMan detection

RNA extraction

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In order to detect hepatitis C virus RNA, this RNA is firstly extracted using standard methods (e.g. Ishizawa M., Kobayashi Y., Miyamura T., Matsuma, S: Simple procedure of DNA isolation from human serum. Nucl. Acids Res. 1991; 19:5792). The amplification is set up as follows:

cDNA synthesis

15 Ten µl of the extracted RNA are mixed with 4 µl of 5x First Strand Buffer (Life Technologies), 2 µl of primer 1 (50 pmol/µl; see SEQ ID No. 1 in the sequence listing), 1 µl of dNTPs (10 mM), 2 µl of dithiothreitol (100 mM), 0.75 µl of water and 0.25 µl of Superscript (50 units, Life Technologies), and the mixture is
20 incubated at 42°C for one hour. The enzyme is then inactivated at 95°C for 5 minutes.

1st PCR

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80 µl of a 1st PCR reaction mixture [61.7 µl of water, 8 µl of 10x PCR buffer (Perkin Elmer), 2 µl of primer 2 (50 pmol/µl; see SEQ ID No. 2 in the sequence listing), 4.8 µl of magnesium chloride (25 mM), 3 µl of dNTPs (2.5 mM), 0.5 µl of Taq DNA polymerase (2.5 units, Perkin Elmer)] are pipetted into the cDNA mixture and the whole is mixed and subjected to the following thermocycles:

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1. Initial denaturation for 1 minute at 90°C
2. 35 cycles of in each case 28 seconds at 94°C (denaturation), 28 seconds at 50°C (annealing) and 38 seconds at 60°C (extension)

2nd PCR

Five μ l of the 1st PCR mixture are mixed with 45 μ l of
5 a 2nd PCR reaction mixture [16.55 μ l of water, 5 μ l of
10 \times PCR buffer (Perkin Elmer), 3 μ l of magnesium
chloride (25 mM), 4 μ l of dNTPs (2.5 mM), 8 μ l of
primer 3 (10 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 3 in the sequence
listing), 8 μ l of primer 4 (10 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No.
10 4 in the sequence listing), 0.25 μ l of the TaqMan probe
5 (10 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 5 in the sequence
listing), 0.2 μ l of Taq DNA polymerase (2.5 units,
Perkin Elmer)] and the mixture is subjected to the
following thermocycles:

- 15 1. Initial denaturation for 1 minute at 90°C
2. 35 cycles of in each case 28 seconds at 94°C
(denaturation), and 1 minute at 56°C (annealing
20 and extension)
3. Cooling at 4°C until evaluation.

Evaluation

25 The PCR reaction is evaluated in a fluorescence
spectrometer. For this, the fluorescence is measured at
the reporter wavelength (518 nm for FAM). A threshold
value is calculated on the basis of the fluorescence of
30 negative controls which do not contain any target
sequence and unknowns are evaluated against this value.

Example 2: HCV nested PCR, detection by means of molecular beacons

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RNA extraction

In order to detect hepatitis C virus RNA, this RNA is
firstly extracted using standard methods (e.g. Ishizawa

M., Kobayashi Y., Miyamura T., Matsuma, S: Simple procedure of DNA isolation from human serum. Nucl. Acids Res. 1991; 19:5792). The amplification is set up as follows:

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cDNA synthesis/1st PCR

Ten μ l of the extracted RNA are mixed with 25 μ l of 2 \times Reaction Mix (Life Technologies), 2 μ l of primer 6
10 (50 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 6 in the sequence listing), 2 μ l of primer 7 (50 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 7 in the sequence listing), 10 μ l of water and 1 μ l of SuperscriptII/Taq polymerase mix (Life Technologies) and the mixture is subjected to the following
15 thermocycles;

1. Incubation for 1 hour at 50°C in order to synthesize the cDNA
- 20 2. Initial denaturation for 2 minutes at 94°C
3. 35 cycles of in each case 28 seconds at 94°C (denaturation), 28 seconds at 50°C (annealing) and 38 seconds at 60°C (extension)

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2nd PCR

Five μ l of the 1st PCR mixture are mixed with 45 μ l of a 2nd PCR reaction mixture [16.55 μ l of water, 5 μ l of
30 10 \times PCR buffer (Perkin Elmer), 3 μ l of magnesium chloride (25 mM), 4 μ l of dNTPs (2.5 mM), 8 μ l of primer 8 (10 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 8 in the sequence listing), 8 μ l of primer 4 (10 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 4 in the sequence listing), 0.25 μ l of the molecular
35 beacon probe 9 (5 pmol/ μ l; see SEQ ID No. 9 in the sequence listing), 0.25 μ l of Taq DNA polymerase (2.5 units, Perkin Elmer)] and the mixture is subjected to the following thermocycles:

1. Initial denaturation for 1 minute at 90°C
2. 35 cycles of in each case 28 seconds at 94°C
(denaturation), 28 seconds at 56°C (annealing) and
5 38 seconds at 72°C (extension)
3. Cooling down to 20°C within 10 minutes

Evaluation

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The PCR reaction is evaluated in a fluorescence spectrometer. For this, the fluorescence is measured at the reporter wavelength (518 nm for FAM). A threshold value is calculated on the basis of the fluorescence of
15 negative controls which do not contain any target sequence and unknowns are evaluated against this value.

Results

- 20 The results achieved in experiments carried out under the above-described conditions were equivalent, both as regards the detectability of HCV genotypes (isolates of genotypes 1 to 5 were tested) and as regards analytical sensitivity, to the results obtained by means of a
25 nested PCR using autologous primers and probes.

The nucleic acid amplification method according to the invention does not require both primers in the primer pair employed to be heterologous. An amplification
30 which is suitable for detecting and/or isolating the target nucleic acid can also be performed using a combination of an autologous primer and a heterologous primer.

- 35 The invention also relates to a reagent set for performing a PCR in which set one or both primers is/are heterologous. The invention additionally relates to a reagent set which, in addition to a abovementioned primers also contains an oligonucleotide probe which is

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derived from a genome of an organism of another species and is consequently heterologous and preferably present as a molecular beacon probe.

- 5 In the case of the oligonucleotides according to the invention, the universal base inosine can be used to compensate for any mismatches which prevent complete hybridization with the nucleotide sequence of the target nucleic acid. Incomplete hybridization with the target nucleic acid can also occur due to the presence of variants of the target nucleic acid which are as yet unknown. These variants can still be specifically detected by the heterologous primers and probes according to the invention because the universal base inosine is inserted into the primer or probe at the mismatch site. The process according to the invention consequently has a larger detection range than a process which operates exclusively with autologous primers and probes.